

Having spent 10 days in May in the City of Jerusalem I can say now I am better informed about what the Arabs of East Jerusalem and its suburbs want and what they don't want, writes Nehad Ismail.

Here I am not expressing my own views or opinions, I merely convey to readers what I heard from ordinary Palestinians living within the municipal boundaries of Jerusalem.

This is not an in-depth political analysis nor a definitive account of what is happening in Jerusalem, but personal observations based on casual conversations.

I had spoken to dozens of people, on average 5 or 6 a day. I spoke to street vendors, shop keepers, cafe owners, taxi drivers, academics, teachers, university students, mothers, hotel receptionists, car salesmen, petrol station attendants, pancake makers, falafel fryers and even a medical doctor.

To begin with I had not witnessed a single incident of stabbing in the Old City which was calm and business as usual.

The Most Shocking Revelation

The most shocking revelation to me was most of the people I spoke to are not happy with the Ramallah administration of Mahmoud Abbas and his colleagues.

Several people told me that the Palestinian Authority is corrupt and is run by merchants or business people not by nationalist statesmen. They see Abbas as putting his family's business interests above the national interests. They say he has compromised too much and has given too many concessions to Israel without getting anything tangible in return.

Not even a single check-point has been removed or prisoner released as a result of his efforts. Talking of check-points, I went to Bethlehem and encountered a couple of barriers but when I was invited to a barbecue on the beach somewhere between old Jaffa and Tel Aviv, we travelled in a convoy of cars from Jerusalem to the sea without being stopped at all.

I suggested, hypothetically, that in any future settlement, East Jerusalem might end up being ruled by the Palestinian Authority. Whilst everyone I spoke to would like to see an end to the occupation, they hated the idea of being ruled by the PLA. More than once I heard someone say "I prefer the Israeli rule if we are given more rights and restrictions are eased or removed." What they hate most is the separation or security wall. Some call it the apartheid wall. Call it what you like but it has disrupted lives and split families, I was told.

"Prior to the erection of the wall. It took me 5 or 6 minutes by car to reach the school where I teach," a woman teacher told me. "Now it takes 35 or 45 minutes depending on the traffic."

What Do You Like About Israeli Rule?

I asked a number of people, "What do you like about Israeli rule?"

They said "we get free medical services, unemployment benefits, and disability allowance and so on like they do in Western Europe." Health provision in the areas ruled by the Palestinian Authority are minimal. There is no comprehensive welfare system as in Israel.

I had not come across genuine cases of severe hardship or poverty in East Jerusalem itself. Those who are not doing well are the disorganized and dysfunctional who have no plan or a budget. They waste their money on cigarettes, the latest gadgets and are constantly changing mobile phones or cars and not saving enough for a rainy day. This type usually lives in rented houses and do not own their properties.

Those who live in the so-called unregulated areas mainly between North Jerusalem and Ramallah cling to their Jerusalem IDs and hope their status will be regulated so they become part of Jerusalem and become fully entitled to the welfare system. One such unregulated area is called Kafr 'Aqab which is the northernmost Palestinian Arab neighbourhood in East Jerusalem. It is located within the municipal boundaries of Jerusalem and two kilometres from Ramallah.

Press Freedom in East Jerusalem

Whilst reading an Arabic newspaper published in Jerusalem, I pointed out to some people that the front page is full of reports critical of Israeli settlement policies, the bad behaviour of settlers towards local Palestinians and the demolition of Palestinian homes etc.

Doesn't this suggest that the Arabic press is free to report and criticise the Israeli government? Yes a retired teacher said, but also the Israelis' own press does this kind of reporting.

However I was told that the Arabic newspapers cannot criticise the Palestinian Authority or Mahmoud Abbas the PLA President. If they do, they will be punished. I remember hearing this kind of stuff in 2004 about the late Yasser Arafat.

What Do You Dislike About the Israelis?

They don't hate Israelis because they are Jewish. "We hate the unjust policies, the harsh measures and the discrimination." Such stuff you always read about in Israel's own vibrant press and media.

Many of them said they have Jewish friends, work with Jewish people as construction workers, mechanics, cooks in hotels and so on and they are happy with the wages they receive. Two or three admitted that they prefer a Jewish boss to an Arab one because the former treats them better.

They don't want the army and the police to breathe down their necks. They don't like to be pushed around and roughed up just because a school truant threw a stone or set an old tyre on fire.

I witnessed a small incident in one of the predominantly Arab suburbs at 11:00 one morning. Kids threw stones at a small unit of soldiers guarding a tiny settlement planted in the middle of an Arab neighbourhood. Reinforcements arrived. The soldiers blocked the roads and traffic piled up for miles. They chased the children, forced shop-keepers to shut their shops, and for almost 45 minutes you'd think a war had broken out.

This kind of over-reaction I was told happens all the time. I was not able to check whether this is true or not. One driver got out of his car shouting this is "collective punishment" meaning thousands are punished because 2 or 3 teenagers decided to provoke the soldiers.

What About the Future?

The more educated think that the future lies in a one-state solution as the two-state solution will not work without territorial contiguity, geographical integrity and unimpeded connectivity between various parts of the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

Some would prefer to be ruled by Jordan and not by the PLA or Hamas. I pointed out to some sceptics by saying look at Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya and Sudan; what do you see apart from violence, death, destruction, corruption etc. Aren't you better off here? Well, they say maybe, but who wants to live for ever under military occupation?

All in all I am optimistic that a solution is not beyond reach. There is mutual mistrust which is understandable given the competing claims. What is needed I am told is the building of trust and the emergence of pragmatic leaders on both sides to convince their constituents of the need for a genuine and lasting peace.

Nehad Ismail is a writer and broadcaster, who writes about issues related to the Middle East from his home in London, and is a frequent contributor to Defence Viewpoints and other publications. This article was first published at <http://newsblaze.com/world/middle-east/> where you can also see his photographs!